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Mismatch and tension: Challenges of legitimate participation in the adoption of Web2.0 technologies to enhance the teaching and learning of vocational and work based trainee teachers.

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Abstract

This paper explores a piece of small-scale research using wikis and blogs as a means for data capture and to support professional learning on teacher education programmes taught by the author at the University of East London (UEL), UK. The teacher education and training in question prepares both 'in-service' (in employment) and 'pre-service' (on voluntary placement and not employed) Vocational Education and Training (VET) professionals to teach in the lifelong learning sector ('post-compulsory sector' or 'Further Education' (FE)) in the UK. The trainees are thus located both as VET professionals-in-the-making and are, themselves, training learners in a variety of VET contexts. This education and training draws upon multiple roles – teachers, trainers, teachers of teachers, trainers of trainers – which are compounded by VET employment and practice in a highly fluid and at times unstable educational sector.

The adoption of Web2.0 tools in this pedagogic and policy location and settlement has been ambiguous and challenging for the identity-forming and boundary-crossing practices of the VET trainees in question. The ambiguity and 'mismatch' between e-learning pedagogies, the needs of learners and trainees and the practice located in professional formation has led to the initial formation of identities of anxiety and confusion and the subsequent articulation of strategies and mechanisms amongst the VET trainees to ensure a more solid basis for professional identity.

Context

The genesis for this research emerges from my own hermeneutical situation – my previous experience in action research in past professional posts and my current role as a teacher educator. As with my trainees, my own professional identity as a teacher educator is as 'emerging' as their own identities as teachers in the lifelong learning sector. Phenomenologically speaking, I am interested in the identity and 'settling-in' changes that new VET teachers make (and are required to make) in their first year of employment and their reasons for thinking about the sorts of issues that preoccupy them: what are the levels of awareness practitioners have over their own practice and how do they construct their own repertoire of ideas, techniques and

approaches? The e-learning developments showcased in this paper and accompanying multimedia presentation have been developed to support the distance learning of trainee teachers in London, United Kingdom. The trainee teachers in question possess multiple identities – occupying a space as both teachers/trainers and trainees/learners. They are also vocational learners – being trained to teach/train while completing voluntary local work placements. University teacher educators working with these vocational learners also occupy multiple positions - the teachers of teachers; the trainers of trainers: Both *teachers* and *teacher educators*. This dual-hermeneutical location further compounds and locates the pedagogy adopted to train the trainers. The teacher educator role is seen as a ‘modelling’ of practice and within this emphasis is placed upon dissemination of craft-tools which can be applied to the trainees’ specific placements and practices. As trainee teachers spend most of their time in the workplace, they are both *workplace* and *work based* vocational learners, and situated (Lave and Wenger, 1991) as ‘*distance learners*’. This situated learning within the workplace, at a distance from the normal routines and workings of the University, has made e-learning and M-learning tools all the more useful to aid learner engagement and to support their training programmes and reflective practices.

Adopting Web2.0 tools enables us to construct discursive space for teacher educators to explore tensions and ambiguities around rejection, accommodation or adoption of e-learning by neo-tribes (Maffesoli, 1996) within the teaching workplace. Within this context, questions can be raised regarding the degree to which trainees entering workplace settings do or do not enter and engage with communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). When e-learning pedagogies are not mirrored in the vocational placements trainees find themselves within, it is less the case that ‘old timers’ teach and support ‘new timers’ and more the case that e-learning creates a ‘mismatch’ between the pedagogy modelled at the university and that seen elsewhere. This makes problematic otherwise ‘clean’ notions of simple socialisation and the transfer of learning in workplace settings.

Genesis

As a new teacher educator, how do I ‘go about the business of teacher education and training’? How do I teach the teachers? How do I support and train and trainers? How do I construct a pedagogy and how can I measure the impact of this – and the legacy of this impact – in those I teach to teach? The notion of ‘modelling’ and of making explicit the mechanics of practice are often seen to be at the heart of notions of teacher education (see Loughran, 2006 and 2007), although they are as problematic, often ambiguous and contested as the very educational sectors and policy settlements they ‘train’ and ‘educate’ for. Nonetheless, the expression of this meta-process – reflecting, making explicit otherwise tacit knowledge, modelling and making visible hidden structures and craft practices and techniques - finds illustration in a number of writings in the field (Loughran, 1996; Hagger and McIntyre, 2006; Kane, 2007; Kroll, 2007; Malderez and Wedell, 2007). As Loughran (2007) notes, “Enacting a pedagogy of teacher education is enmeshed in the ways in which teacher educators knowingly and purposefully create opportunities for students of teaching to see into teaching.” (Loughran, 2007: 1).

The Web2.0 tools and techniques which are the subject of this paper are my response to this particular professional location: how can I support the education of my trainees, and how can I chart and measure the impact of my teaching? How can I

chart the development of teacher identities and roles amongst those whom I have taught and trained to teach?

“...in light of some of the early discussions on my PGCE I was worried that I had been too naïve about the challenges of teaching in FE colleges...and was left wondering if this was the right path for me after all...” (Trainee reflection)

Research questions

If contradictory policy agendas and fluid and global policy narratives have enabled a degree of autonomy of practice for the FE sector (Avis, et. al., 2003), where does this lead Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in FE in the UK? What are the pedagogic choices on offer, if practice is as fluid and open as I have argued above? I assert that post-structural readings of the current FE political ennui are such that we can see practitioners as able to cut across and step through boundaries of practice, identity and pedagogy, reforming themselves and their professional work in doing so. I am interested in how new FE practitioners go about the construction of these roles, in the light of the current policy settlements in the FE sector.

In addition, in light of the interest in capturing developing (new) teacher identities, the ‘research problematic’ would be the construction of appropriate methodological tools to aid the exploration of issues of identity, given the subjectivity of the issue under investigation. I have chosen to draw upon the use of emergent technologies (blogs and wikis) as a form of (digital) qualitative-based e-focus group, due to the flexibility these offer for both sharing across a virtual community and for ownership by those who construct them (Kamel Boulos and Wheelert, 2007).

Research questions:

- How ‘prepared’ are FE NQTs for the teaching role?
- How ‘prepared’ are FE NQTs for membership of further education communities?
- How do new entrants to the teaching profession figure out who they are?
- How do new FE practitioners ‘navigate’ the construction of their professionalism?

“I think as a naïve teacher trainee I went in with these expectations and did not get them matched” (Trainee reflection)

“I think I have learnt my lesson that not all teachers have the time to take on a trainee, and not all teachers like their jobs! If I could play this year out again, I would not have such high expectations (note to self: maybe find a proper therapist!) but I would still expect honesty, commitment and trust to envelope the mentoring role.” (Trainee reflection)

“I’ve enjoyed my placement and found the college and staff to be friendly and welcoming. However, there have been discrepancies between the pedagogy I’ve learnt at UEL and my mentor’s own pedagogy and I found dialogue between myself and my mentor to be limited in this respect.” (Trainee reflection)

Purpose

The aim of this enquiry was to chart the identity formation of a small group of new teachers as they leave my teacher education programme and enter their first teaching posts in the ambivalent and turbulent world of the Further Education sector. Much of the literature commentating on the past decade of 'workplace reform' within the Further Education sector adopts the language of a post-modern (and at times a post-structural) pessimism: it speaks of a late-modern and reflexive modern ennui characterised by anxiety, uncertainty, de-professionalism and surveillance (Avis, 2002; Ainley and Bailey, 1997; Wallace, 2002). Such is the prevalence of the managerialism within the sector, Reeves (1995) described the FE sector as being 'totalitarian' in outlook and in working conditions and relationships. However, there is another interpretation. While not negating the application of post-structural analytical tools, nor the realities of problematic conditions, neo-Fordist working regimes and anxious, unconstructed, fragmented post-modern identities, is it possible to see change within lifelong learning as a space for *possibility* not pessimism. The possibility of identity change and also the possibility for newly formed identities.

"This year I have been on a journey. Not only on an intellectual level, but also on an emotional and psychological level, I think, it is a change in my very identity and a growth in my resilience of emotions – I am hypersensitive but this course has opened me up to embrace new values, become emotionally stronger and realise my 'niche' in the world." (Trainee reflection)

The fluidity of Further Education, as characterised in the writings of Avis (1999 and 2002), point to *shifting identities* as global policy agendas shape the reality of the FE sector but more importantly, are in turn adopted, managed, maintained and subverted by the lived experience of trainees, teachers and teacher educators in the FE sector. Avis (1999) offers an interpretation of the Further Education sector where previous notions of 'proletarianisation' or 'de-skilling' are seen as lacking and limited. For Avis (as for Bathmaker and Avis, 2007), FE is witnessing a transformation process – of both teaching and learning and of identity. The transformation of teaching and learning itself opens up a space within which it is possible for VET professionals to explore new professional knowledge, re-evaluate practice and construct new identities. This is a positive interpretation of the work place reforms undertaken by the sector over the past decade, but one that owes as such to post-structuralism as nihilistic interpretations of 'risk' and the onset of control and compliance: both recognise that discourses produce subjects under their gaze, but the interpretation placed upon this subjectification process by Avis suggests that agents within policy settlements and ideologies are able to carve out and negotiate futures and identities for themselves (Avis, et. al., 2002; Avis, 2002).

"My first day in college was also a very daunting experience. I remember walking in and thinking I was totally out of my depth. I remember watching my mentor teach and was amazed by his interaction with the students. He was talking to them on their level, he was cool and funny and the students seemed very engaged. I just couldn't see how I would ever be that natural in front of the class. I think being a trainee teacher coming in to sit in a classroom to observe half way through the year is actually quite an awkward position to be in. It's horrible to feel in the way, out of your depth and pretty socially inadequate. Luckily my mentor eased me into teaching quite gently." (Trainee reflection)

“I think I have learnt an awful lot in the time that I have been here but I also feel kind of overwhelmed. I know that there is so much more to learn and believe that this time next year I will be so much further on in my career. The combination of placement and theory work is very useful and compliment one another. It is however quite amusing at times how reality and theory are worlds apart! I am enjoying creating my teaching persona, my teaching style and look forward to the year ahead. I will miss my classed from this year- can't I take them with me?!!!” (Trainee reflection)

For the FE sector in the UK, we can make the case that despite obvious managerialism and neo-Fordist discourses, and the adoption of globalization themes within policy rhetoric and narratives (such as the call for ‘world class’ skills and competition and the rise of the ‘knowledge economy’), it is nonetheless possible to see FE teachers and trainee teachers as navigating identities situated within the institutions they work and compounded by the learners they teach (Avis and Bathmaker, 2009; Bathmaker and Avis, 2007).

To support the emerging identities of VET professionals training I have adopted a wide range of e-learning provision in my teaching and training, alongside the research using wikis for impact measurement. The presentation accompanying this paper illustrates to international colleagues these tools and e-pedagogies, allowing articulation of meta-conversation around distance learning and workplace provision, and the challenges of e-learning within such space. This work adopts a variety of e-learning tools: video blogs, social networking platforms (using the emergent technology of ‘elgg’), podcasts, wikis, Twitter feeds and an e-zine. These tools were constructed through collaboration with the University’s school of distance and e-learning. They are designed to structure trainee support before and after sessions, rather than ‘lecture capture’ during sessions. The podcasting blog allows for continuation of (asynchronous) support from classroom settings – drawing out themes/issues for clarity and extension. Many trainees use the podcasts for M-learning opportunities, allowing for a reorientation of the places and spaces of their distance learning. The Twitter feed provides learners with regular updates for reading and access to online academic sources. The social networking site adopts the technology of the emergent elgg platform to create a reflective space for the mentors of trainees. This space houses video blogging resources designed to support mentors’ workplace CPD.

Findings and challenges

There has been considerable use of the podcasting blog and Twitter feeds, resulting in favourable feedback from external quality audits and inspections, and from the learners themselves. It is observed that through the Twitter feed learners are reading more widely and bringing new knowledge to sessions. The significant challenge in developing and using these e-learning tools with new entrants to the teaching profession has been the resultant pedagogic ‘mismatch’ many of the cohort have experienced with the teaching and learning strategies dominant within local placement providers.

“It’s like a different world. What they tell me and inspire me [on the training] with and then what everyone else is doing.” (Trainee reflection)

Evidence from trainees' reflective accounts of their work based learning suggests that all too often e-learning tools are seen as marginal, of little value, or even as 'distractions' from the '*serious business*' of classroom teaching. This mismatch between the 'new' e-learning and 'old' face-to-face learning raises questions and observations regarding the legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) of (new) trainee teachers as they enter workplace settings.

"I mean, they [established practitioners] say 'what's the point' and 'I cant use it'. My mentor said it was a waste of time and not serious teaching." (Trainee reflection)

The presentation of this paper will illustrate how each e-resource stands alone, yet combines to construct a rich tapestry for distance and workplace learners. This presentation will showcase the blog, podcast and Twitter tools developed in this work and illustrate the discussion of these tools through streaming audio and video clips. Use will be made of trainees' own reflective accounts of their workplace learning to draw out a critique of the applicability of notions of legitimate peripheral participation to e-teaching and e-learning.

Research findings

On the '*Reflections-in-practice*' wiki created for this research participants were able to construct 'threads' for discussion – based upon what they felt were the important issues to 'chat' about. I could e-moderate, ask questions, pose questions to others and the participants were able to reply to each other within each thread. This wiki was used to explore with ex-trainees their emerging identity constructions at a time when they entered employment for the first time.

'Threads' posted by sample include:

- How useful and relevant was the PGCE?
- Ending the PGCE
- Those first few lessons
- Successes and failures – highs and lows in the classroom
- Honesty time!
- Pedagogic mismatches?
- New roles and responsibilities?

Data was coded – terms and phrases were pulled-out of the data; terms were matched together. Themes emerged from the data and in turn, codes were categorised together into groups.

Initial codes included:

- Subject pedagogy
- Finding professional identity
- 'Pedagogic mismatch'
- Burden of performativity

Codes were grouped into categories on the second reading/analysis, drawing together codes which painted common pictures. For example, the category 'Finding professional identity' was comprised of a number of initial codes – such as:

- Need to find new inspiration
- Continuing learning

- Needing to navigate through office politics
- Mistrust at staff negativity
- Surprise at motivation of staff and students
- Making transition into a new role
- Constructing new identity
- Life-work imbalance

Ongoing concerns emerging through the blogging by the NQT sample have been:

1. feeling 'alone' in the NQT year;
2. missing regular support from the training programme;
3. a sense of concern at pedagogic 'mismatch' between training and mundane 'every-day practice';
4. and the excitement and overwhelming responsibility of 'knowing ones own learners'.

"Not change your style and your belief completely but see the bigger picture. If you don't achieve the best grades, you don't get to progress and influence even more how the teaching is done." (ex-trainee Wiki post)

A key theme – and one raised by the participants themselves as a 'thread' for continued discussion through the six month period has been the notion of the '*Pedagogic Mismatch*' there has been between their PGCE training pedagogy – based upon experimentation and active-learning – and that in operation through their employment institutions

*"Challenge and stretch yes, go for it at any costs??? Not really. I think that these observations are sterile and not aimed at getting learners to learn but at getting the college to record your 'progress' and giving them the info they need for OFSTED and interna; reporting."*¹ (ex-trainee Wiki post)

"...you need to play the game. While you can do what you know is best in your classes, when you are being observed you need to know the rules of the game and plan strategically." (ex-trainee Wiki post)

There are a number of elements to this 'mismatch':

1. Frustration at 'older staff' and their practice;
2. Feeling of tension between models of 'good practice' on PGCE and what employment institutions were celebrating as 'normal' or 'good practice';
3. Surprise and anxiety at prevalence of 'didactic' teaching;
4. Surprise and frustration at learners who valued didactic methods
5. 'Emotional drain' of feeling 'unconnected' with colleagues.

"The worrying thing is, is that my colleague commented on the fact that she did the didactic with activities because otherwise 'they don't think they are learning anything' My stomach churned over and I felt myself getting quite annoyed actually!! Not toward my colleague, but towards the whole system! After doing my PGCE training and it changing my life completely and my

¹ All quotations from the data (re)presented here exactly as the comment was typed and posted by the respondent on the wiki

ideas about what teaching should be, to hear that comment, after working so hard really made me feel angry, annoyed, anxious and a bit sad actually!” (ex-trainee Wiki post)

Conclusions – moving on, out and up

VET teachers still in training have found the e-learning provision for their own training both helpful and supportive, but at the same time disconnected to the provision they are seeing (and being encouraged to replicate) in their own training contexts and classrooms. Equally, the use of e-learning tools as a data gathering mechanism has allowed trainees to articulate their anxieties and concerns as they enter the workforce, and establish firmer identities for their new roles. The wiki tools allowed for the elaboration and exploration of the emerging identities of the VET professionals as they worked-out both their new identities and pedagogic practices alongside more established colleagues. This raised issues for the legitimate participation of this group, and located them as boundary-crossers – moving from trainee to trainer as they (re)located from the University to their placement and back again. For some, the boundaries were further compounded as they felt their pedagogy ‘mismatched’ which that of ‘legitimate colleagues’ and already established legitimate participants.

The participants in the research were both excited about the prospect of, as one put it, ‘*carving out*’ new professional identities but frustrated at the same time with what they saw as poor and average practice, at the ‘*mismatch*’ between what they believed about learning, teaching and pedagogy, and what they felt was ‘*thrust upon*’ them by the quality mechanisms of their employment institutions.

“I am also sooooo confused about what the college is looking for with regards to teaching practice. My colleague, who I adore and totally respect and who i think is awesome, got observed today and got a grade two for mainly didactic teaching with activities inbetween.....I feel totally lost! On the other hand, I love the work and the stuff I am doing with my students and feel it is right, but will I need to have a didactic approach with a few bits of activities when I am observed next year????!!! Any suggestions guys?” (ex-trainee Wiki post)

The participants were surprised and overwhelmed by the levels of ‘performativity’ in their employment institutions – and felt they had been sheltered from this while training pre-service. There was also wide-spread recognition that their teaching professional role was ‘*there for the making*’. They operated with a strong notion that their own professional identity was contested and at odds with what they felt was happening to their institutions and that they worked in a space where they had to ‘*play the game*’ while still making sure they taught how they wanted to. They saw themselves as active agents in their own professional practices, but that this involvement would be both a challenge and also occurring at times in ‘*secret*’ from the wider ‘*institutional game*’.

These concerns and surprises have enabled my own reflections about being a teacher educator and preparing trainees for a role in the turbulent FE sector. Through these reflections of the impact of my practice, I have developed a podcasting blog² where I am able to articulate ‘answers’ to the questions and themes raised by the sample – which can then be made available to current trainees. This podcasting weblog teaching tool is part lecture capture, part e-learning blog and partly a space

² Located at <http://blog.uelconnect.org.uk/warren> and available for all to view.

where I can reflect upon wider professional issues and make podcasts available to my existing trainees to extend their reflective practice separate from, but parallel to teaching sessions.



Figure 1. Screen shot from the podcasting weblog used to support learning on the UEL PGCE PCET programme.

The experience of this enquiry, to date, indicates that online and digital tools allow for an ease of data generation and gathering. They have allowed rich qualitative data to be produced which at times speaks with a very personal voice; making invisible classrooms slightly less private than before. The regular and at times 'throw-away' nature of the threads, and the openness of many of the blogged posts, suggests that the act of working digitally and communally enables participants to manipulate and mould thoughts and reflections in reflective and reflexive ways.

The podcasting weblog for the vocational training of these new teachers is located at <http://blog.uelconnect.org.uk/warren> and the Twitter feed can be viewed at <http://twitter.com/allthingspcet>

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